

## LITTER--THE VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES OF RURAL OHIOANS

by

Dr. Joseph F. Donnermeyer  
Director, National Rural Crime Prevention Center  
and  
Crime Prevention Specialist, Ohio Cooperative Extension Service,  
The Ohio State University

One enduring image of the countryside is its natural beauty. This image is often put forth as the reason that "country living" is superior to life in the city. The city, as the belief goes, is "drab" and "dirty" which, not so subtly, implies that urban areas have a litter problem. In contrast, rural areas do not.

This image belies the truth because even during informal "over the fence" conversations between country people, the "problem" of litter is likely to arise. Formal surveys of the views and experiences of rural Ohioans support the individual testimony and anecdotes about the growing concern with litter in the countryside.

The purpose of this brief report is to document the extent of the problem based on two surveys conducted in rural Ohio by the National Rural Crime Prevention Center, The Ohio State University. The first study was a victim survey completed in 1983 and focused on crimes occurring to farm operators, including their experiences with litter. Altogether, 1200 farm operators in 30 counties of Ohio were interviewed. The second study was conducted in the summer of 1985 in Shelby County as part of an evaluation of the "Shelby Eyes and Ears" crime prevention program. Eight-hundred residents of this predominantly rural county were interviewed.

## THE FARM STUDY

The farm study included questions both about how extensive farmers viewed the problem of litter and how litter affects the operation of their farm.

Table 1 shows farmers' opinions relative to litter as a problem. There were three questions used to measure their opinions. To the statement "litter causes a lot of damage to farm equipment and livestock each year," 76.3 percent agreed. Only 18.3 percent of the farmers disagreed with this statement.

An even greater majority (90.5 percent) either strongly agreed or agreed with the statement that "litter poses a health and safety hazard if it is not pick up properly."

Although farmers in general perceive litter as a problem, they appear more divided on whether the imposition of stiffer penalties will "prevent people from littering." Only 33.5 percent strongly agreed with the statement "imposing severe fines will prevent people from littering." Over one-third (37.8 percent) were undecided and 28.7 percent disagreed on the issue of fines to prevent litter.

Table 2 shows the results of several questions that were asked farmers about the kinds of damage they incur as a result of litter. The time referent period for these questions was "in the previous 12 months." In order to put these figures in perspective, also included are several other types of so-called more "traditional" crimes. Overall, affirmative responses to questions about litter damage on the farm ranged from 2.1 to nearly 58 percent. In contrast, only 2.1 percent had a piece of farm machinery stolen, 5.1 percent experienced a burglary to a farm building, 10 percent had a theft of farm equipment (other than machinery) occur

TABLE 1: FARMER'S ATTITUDES TOWARD LITTER

Question/Response	Number	Percent
Litter causes a lot of damage to farm equipment and livestock each year		
Agree	728	76.3
Undecided	52	5.4
Disagree	<u>175</u>	<u>18.3</u>
Total	955	100.0
Litter poses a health and safety hazard if it is not picked up properly		
Agree	865	90.5
Undecided	39	4.1
Disagree	<u>51</u>	<u>5.3</u>
Total	955	100.0
Imposing severe fines will prevent people from littering		
Agree	319	33.5
Undecided	360	37.8
Disagree	<u>274</u>	<u>28.7</u>
Total	953	100.0

TABLE 2: INCIDENTS OF LITTER AND CRIME OCCURRING TO FARMERS

Question/Response	Number	Percent
A. Litter Damage		
Equipment damaged by trash or litter		
Yes	100	10.5
No	<u>856</u>	<u>89.5</u>
Total	955	100.0
Livestock injured from trash or litter		
Yes	20	2.1
No	<u>932</u>	<u>97.9</u>
Total	952	100.0
Did farmer or member of household spend time cleaning litter from roadsides next to or around the property?		
Yes	552	57.9
No	<u>402</u>	<u>42.1</u>
Total	954	100.0
Did farmer or member of household spend time cleaning litter from fields, property lines, fence rows, or other parts of farm property?		
Yes	409	43.1
No	<u>539</u>	<u>56.9</u>
Total	948	100.0

TABLE 2: INCIDENTS OF LITTER AND CRIME OCCURRING TO FARMERS (cont.)

Question/Response	Number	Percent
<b>B. Other Crime Types</b>		
<b>Vandalism</b>		
Yes	140	14.8
No	<u>809</u>	<u>85.2</u>
Total	949	100.0
<b>Theft of Farm Machinery</b>		
Yes	20	2.1
No	<u>934</u>	<u>97.9</u>
Total	954	100.0
<b>Theft of Farm Equipment on Premises (excluding burglary)</b>		
Yes	95	10.0
No	<u>858</u>	<u>90.0</u>
Total	953	100.0
<b>Burglarly—Into Farm Buildings</b>		
Yes	49	5.1
No	<u>905</u>	<u>94.9</u>
Total	954	100.0

somewhere on the farm premises (other than in a farm building), and nearly 15 percent experienced incidents of vandalism.

Livestock injured as a result of litter occurred to 2.1 percent of the farm operators. In most cases, the incidents involved the animal stepping on or, in some other way, being cut by broken glass or other material. Eleven and one-half percent of the farm operators have had damage to farm machinery due to litter. The more frequent types of incidents related to the interviewers during the survey process included flat tires or equipment that got "clogged up" by large pieces of metal, glass, and other materials.

Nearly 58 percent of the farmers or members of their household have spent time cleaning up litter from roadsides next to or near their property. In nearly every case, these clean-up activities took place several times each year. Finally, 43.1 percent of the farmers mentioned that time was spent cleaning up litter directly on their property, such as from fields, fence rows, and property lines. Again, almost every farmer indicated that such clean up activities take place several times each year.

As can be surmised, farmers are clearly concerned about litter and their concern is based on direct experiences.

#### THE SHELBY COUNTY STUDY

Respondents in the Shelby County study were asked three questions, two having to do with perceived increase/decrease in litter, and the third concerned perceived vulnerability of having litter thrown in one's yard.

As Table 3 illustrates, more Shelby Countians believe that litter has increased (40.9 percent) in their neighborhood since 1980 than

TABLE 3: SHELBY COUNTIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD LITTER

Question/Response	Number	Percent
Compared to 1980, how much do you think litter in your neighborhood has changed?		
Increased	327	40.9
About the Same	315	39.4
Decreased	<u>158</u>	<u>19.7</u>
Total	800	100.0
Compared to 1980, how much do you think litter in Shelby County has changed?		
Increased	318	39.8
About the Same	221	27.6
Decreased	<u>261</u>	<u>32.6</u>
Total	800	100.0
Compared to other parts of Shelby County, how likely is it that people in this neighborhood will have trash/litter thrown on their property?		
Less Likely	297	37.1
About the Same	279	34.9
More Likely	<u>224</u>	<u>28.0</u>
Total	800	100.0

decreased (19.7 percent). An almost equal proportion (39.4 percent) of respondents thought that the amount of litter in their neighborhood had stayed about the same.

About equal proportions thought that litter had increased (39.8 percent) or decreased (32.6 percent) in the whole county. When the results of these two questions were compared, it seems to indicate that Shelby Countians' perceptions of the litter as a problem were limited to their own neighborhood where they were more likely to notice it and be sensitive to it.

The "Shelby County Eyes and Ears" crime prevention program has been in existence for about eight years. In the open-country areas of Shelby County it consists of a CB patrol program and in the city of Sidney (the county seat), it includes blockwatch. One explicit purpose of crime prevention programs which incorporate greater cooperation among neighbors is to reduce crime. However, a second and equally explicit objective is to make people feel more safe and secure in their neighborhoods and, therefore, to feel better about the kinds of communities in which they live.

The Shelby County study presents an opportunity to compare perceptions about litter (therefore, testing for the second purpose of community-based crime prevention programs) because an equal number of respondents living both inside and outside the program areas were surveyed. The results are summarized in Table 4 and suggest that in actual fact, residents within crime prevention program areas, when compared to residents outside these areas, were more likely to feel better about the problem of litter.

The proportion of respondents who perceived litter as increasing in their neighborhood since 1980 was nearly identical for those residing inside (41.2 percent) and outside (40 percent) of prevention program



TABLE 4: A COMPARISON OF SHELBY COUNTIANS' ATTITUDES TOWARD LITTER  
 ACCORDING TO RESIDENCE INSIDE OR OUTSIDE OF CRIME PREVENTION  
 PROGRAM AREA

Question/Response	Inside Prevention Program Areas (Number = 400)	Outside Prevention Program Areas (Number = 400)
Compared to 1980, how much do you think litter in your neighborhood has changed?		
Increased	41.2	40.0
About the Same	38.8	41.0
Decreased	<u>20.0</u>	<u>19.0</u>
Total	100.0	100.0
Compared to 1980, how much do you think litter in Shelby County has changed?		
Increased	36.0	51.2
About the Same	26.3	31.5
Decreased	<u>37.7</u>	<u>17.3</u>
Total	100.0	100.0
Compared to other parts of Shelby County, how likely is it that people in this neighborhood will have trash/litter thrown on their property?		
Less Likely	39.7	32.0
About the Same	34.8	35.0
More Likely	<u>25.5</u>	<u>33.0</u>
Total	100.0	100.0

areas. However, residents of prevention program areas were far less likely to believe that litter had increased throughout the county (36 percent versus 51.2 percent). Furthermore, residents of program areas were more likely to feel that they were less vulnerable to having litter/trash thrown on their front yards (39.7 percent) when compared to those who live outside prevention program areas (32 percent).

#### SUMMARY

The results of both surveys indicate that rural Ohioans believe that litter is a growing and serious problem. However, the results also indicate that corrective action is possible. Specifically, the evidence indicates crime prevention programs help moderate the perceived extent of the problem. However, many more rural Ohioans live beyond the boundaries of prevention programs than reside within. In addition, other public education and community-based programs may also be necessary. The search for solutions to litter in rural Ohio must continue.